

A Brief History of the Animal Rights Coalition from 1978 to 1990

from a speech given in 1992 by Vonnie Thomasberg, ARC co-founder and past president

1978 to 1980

First, I want to let you know how and why a group like the Animal Rights Coalition (ARC) needed to be organized. I and others were working with the Minnesota chapter of a well known national organization. We were thwarted at every turn by the local head of that group when we wanted to do more than stuff envelopes and attend meetings. The more we tried, the more stumbling blocks were thrown in our path. Finally, we were told that the founder of the organization (from the east coast) did not want ideas from anyone except his leader his Minnesota. None of us thought this was a true representation of the national head, but instead of fighting the Minnesota leader, we left.

During these years I attended several vegetarian and animal rights conferences in upstate New York. There I met many people who would have a great impact on future decisions and actions. We were all getting started at the grassroots level. Networking between these people has been invaluable to ARC and the actions that have taken place in Minnesota. A few that I met and stayed in contact with were Jim Mason, founder of *The Animals Agenda* magazine; Alex Hershaft, founder of FARM; George Cave, founder of Trans Species; Connie Salamone, Feminists for Animal Rights; Kim Stallwood, an activist from England and later issues coordinator for PETA; Aviva Cantor, author of, among other writings, *The Club, The Yoke, and The Leash*, which appeared in *MS* magazine in 1983; Paul Obis, founder of *Vegetarian Times* magazine; and Alex Pacheco and Ingrid Newkirk, founders of PETA. The only people that attended these conferences were grassroots organizers. In the years to come I attended meetings and conferences in Maryland, Chicago, and Madison, among others. I didn't know it then, but networking was in my blood.

It was decided to have a meeting of interested local groups and individuals to try to form a coalition. The event was held in Powderhorn Park in 1980. About 30 people attended who were recognized activists. The idea of a coalition was not met with enthusiasm by most of the attendees.

Three people emerged from this meeting who hoped a coalition was still workable – this time, it would be a coalition of established groups, both local and national. The three grew to seven by October 1980 and we discussed our goals at that time. We thought of ourselves as an umbrella group, with no individual memberships, but charged with the coordinating and networking of established grassroots groups. Between long discussions on how to achieve our goal; administrative items such as developing a logo, printing stationery, opening a bank account (we each contributed \$25), writing by-laws, incorporating as a non-profit, advertising (we had no mailing list to speak of), and many other tasks were completed.

There were some disagreements during this time and it was a difficult birth. In fact, some of the meetings consisted of disagreements from beginning to end. I went away from them exhausted, but not disillusioned. Everyone was so passionate. We never lost focus on why we were there – the animals. I'm certain that was the glue that kept us together.

One thing we agreed on almost immediately was that the issues we worked on would not overlap the work of other local organizations. So it was decided that our main efforts would be in the areas of vivisection, animals in entertainment, and animals used as food, and that we would support the efforts of local groups working in other areas of animal exploitation. We brainstormed on issues of community outreach, name recognition, and how to involve and empower people regarding animal issues.

We did finally become focused. It was decided that we probably would not be successful if we took on more than two efforts in our first year. We decided to focus on World Day for Lab Animals in April and, because I had such a wonderful feeling about conferences at that time, I suggested that we try holding a conference, which would be the first one in the Midwest. We decided to hold the conference in September 1981.

Once we made these decisions there was no turning back. None of the grassroots groups had held a conference so I started contacting for advice Old Guard groups on the east and west coasts that had held conferences. These groups were not helpful and, in one case, actually refused to talk to us. One outcome of these snubs was that in the coming years I diligently contacted all newly founded groups across the country, offering whatever help we could give. The response was many grateful thank you's, and this effort helped not only them, but ARC. *Animal's Agenda* was a great help in this effort, as the magazine listed newly founded groups.

1981

ARC finally was incorporated as a non-profit, tax-exempt group in early 1981.

We decided that how we used animals in our language was important. So much of it devalued animals. Not only words like *pet* and *it*, but “eats like a pig,” “stubborn as a mule,” “he’s a wolf,” “bitch,” and so on. We put together a paper called *Animal Crackers*. It’s hard to believe how many terms and words we found that were derogatory. *Animal Rights* was also considered, by most, to be an extremely radical term. It was NEVER used in everyday language or by the media – not that we had to worry as the media never covered any of ARC’s efforts.

A successful World Day for Lab Animals was held at the University of Minnesota. We were surprised and delighted to find out that all animal research was discontinued and security tightened on that April 24th. It was then that we realized that the movement did have power and the abusers were starting to run scared. This shutdown continued for several years each April 24th.

With this victory under our belts, we worked hard on our next big event, the fall conference. We had seen Michael Fox of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) at a presentation he gave on the St. Paul campus of the U of MN in January 1981 and talked to him at that time. He was excited about having a conference in the Midwest and agreed to be one of the keynote speakers. Cleveland Amory, author and founder of The Fund for Animals, also agreed to make a keynote speech. At this time, the ARC board had swelled to 10, and 26 people had donated their time and/or money to the event. Many local and national activists participated. Many local

groups, who had been less than supportive of the event, began to see that it was going to be a real happening, with people from across the country sending in their registrations. Suddenly local support materialized. In retrospect, we certainly could have used that support during the planning of this huge undertaking, but we knew it was a real victory for the coalition that we still dreamed about.

After much searching we decided to hold the conference at the Marriott hotel in Bloomington. The conference began on Friday evening and ended late Sunday afternoon. Everything went very well, much better than we expected. We were flying high until breakfast. Two of us had worked with the chef on the vegetarian meals, which of course, were a real oddity at that time. The meals were not vegan and contained dairy and egg products. We were treated as oddities, but we held our ground. Everything went well until breakfast. The menu consisted of cereal, pancakes, scrambled eggs, Danish rolls, juices, and so on. Well, we entered the dining area to the terrible smell of sausage and bacon. I ran to the kitchen and asked that they be removed promptly. I was told that the chef would not remove them because his reputation hinged on the presentation of his “craft.” I couldn’t believe it! After much insistence, the offending food was removed and we all sat down to our slightly cold food.

After the conference, we all vowed that we would never again go through the planning of another conference. But after the dust settled we got our energy back and held conferences (each one better than the last) in 1983, 1985, and 1987 (and they were all vegan). We were told that our conferences were the most memorable because of their content and structure of other conferences held throughout the country. We heard this numerous times, not only from attendees, but also from the speakers. By our third conference, leaders from across the country were asking us to speak and participate.

1981 was also the year that Dr. Edward Taub and his assistant were brought to trial on 15 counts of animal cruelty. This was a milestone – the first time that a researcher had been convicted of cruelty to animals, and the first time that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) had suspended funding for research on the grounds of cruelty. The primates removed from that lab were called the *Silver Springs Monkeys*. Alex Pacheco of PETA was the whistle blower; he had worked undercover gathering evidence. This was a turning point in the Animal Rights movement. I believe that this particular case caused the formation of countless grassroots groups across the country – and the grassroots movement was off and running. I attended the Animal Rights Mobilization (ARM) conference in Maryland, which focused on the Silver Springs Monkey case. We discussed how to use this case as a catalyst to bring the movement stature and to bring people into the movement who were previously hesitant. The Silver Springs Monkeys did not suffer and die in vain – these animals were the symbol of the Animal Rights movement for many years to come.

1982

We had pretty much given up on the idea of a coalition and began monthly general meetings and actively sought members. We were broke! The general meeting usually numbered about 10 people, not including board members, and was held in park buildings. Up to this time, the core group met at two of our homes for monthly meetings. We need a place to store our “stuff” and

that place ended up being my house. This lasted for about four years. A lot of the office had to be hauled to the meeting each month, about six big boxes that had to be packed, hauled, unpacked, packed, hauled, and unpacked again. I look back and wonder where all that energy came from – but we all know it is the passion of wanting to help free the animals.

You must remember that in 1982 the movement was still very much in the ridicule stage. We were whispered about, people tentatively called or attended a meeting, we had no media coverage, and of course we were called bleeding hearts and wackos. People felt that they had permission to say or do any derogatory thing they wanted to us. None of us had very thick skins and we had to keep reminding each other why we were willing to be ridiculed, laughed at, and confronted. Many couldn't take it, so the number of ARC members did not grow rapidly. We did not have the documented research and ammunition that we enjoy now.

The first ARC newsletter was published in the spring of 1982. Our goal was still a coalition; dreams die hard I guess. The newsletter had news of course, but also included a directory of local animal groups, including the humane societies. We also solicited articles from these groups so they could inform our readership about their activities. This was less than successful and we discontinued solicitation of outside articles and the directory after a couple of years.

1982 was the year that I became president of ARC.

I attended a Mobilization for Animals (MFA) conference in the spring of 1982. Richard Morgan had begun a massive project for the next World Day for Lab Animals in 1983, targeting four sites around the country for huge demonstrations and rallies. I introduced Pam Johnson and Sue Anderson, who lived in Madison, to Morgan, knowing that if they accepted, they would be great regional organizers. I volunteered ARC as the Minnesota coordinator.

1983

ARC began receiving requests for speakers and whoever had the time filled those requests.

The mobilization rallies in the four cities were extremely successful. Busloads and carloads of people from Minnesota descended on Madison. About 5,000 in all attended, which was second only to New York City. I met many wonderful new people including Amanda Blake (Miss Kitty on Gunsmoke), who was a very warm, natural, and lovely person.

ARC's numbers grew because of this alliance, but the downside was that ARC was almost lost because of this. Many new people in Minnesota had a hard time separating MFA from ARC. The lines were muddled and they were confused, despite the fact that at each meeting prior to and after the event, in Madison, I explained that one group supporting another group's efforts was the norm. This situation made it evident that we needed more local visibility so this wouldn't happen again – that our name would be synonymous with the movement in our area.

Because of our growth committees began to emerge such as fundraising, newsletter production, and a very active letter writing committee.

Organizing and participating in events and projects such as fur protests, Meat-Out, World Day for Lab Animals, and World Day for Farm Animals increased in activity and the numbers of people participating.

A few courageous women such as Joan Washburn began organizing a Speakers' Bureau. They dedicated the next few years to gathering visual and written material for presentations, including a speakers' guide. The outcome of all this work was very successful.

The second ARC conference took place in September 1983. About 45 speakers and panelists from across the country participated. We invited the opposition to participate that year. The only people that accepted were factory farmers and the President of the Livestock Conservation Institute of Minnesota, although we knew of other conference attendees who were there as "spies." The hog producer was very proud of his "farm" and brought a slide presentation to impress us, with the same kinds of images that we show in our brochures and publications depicting the horrors of factory farming. This really opened our eyes to the long struggle we faced.

Our conferences were featured in many publications such as the *Vealer* and *Farm Report*, among many others. In an ironic twist, we received more written coverage from our opposition's publications than from anywhere else.

Many researchers were invited to participate in the conference. We finally got a "yes" from Irwin Fox, who used mostly dogs in useless (my words) experiments at the U of MN. I worked at the U at that time in the School of Public Health. While in the cafeteria one afternoon, I turned to see a very furious Irwin Fox coming at me yelling and screaming. Of course, every head turned his way. I finally realized that he was hollering that I had set him up and that he would not participate in the conference. After asking him several times to calm down and asking him what he meant by "setting him up," his very red face yelled out that we were having him appear with anti-vivisectionists. Then he stormed away. A few weeks later I met him by chance in the hall. He tried to get by me, but I did manage to stop him and remind him that we had been above board all the way with him. He knew that it was an animal rights conference and if he didn't feel confident about presenting his views and describing his work to any group of people, including animal rights people, then I felt sorry for him. I felt a mighty victory at the time.

1984

I believe this was the year when one of our fur demonstrations was pretty exciting. Schlampp's was having a fur show at a local nightclub. Three of us, dressed to the hilt, attended. Little did they know that we wore anti-fur T-shirts under our dress jackets. We each went to different parts of the two-story club. I stood in the middle of the large, dimly lit area where the tables were set up. I took off my jacket and slowly started to turn this way and that. Some people looked at me hard, like they couldn't believe what they were seeing, and the looks on their faces when they realized what they were looking at were priceless. I had a hard time keeping from laughing, but I did smile, and a lot. Suddenly two huge bouncers bore down on me. They asked me to leave. I showed them my ticket stub. They disappeared. The owner of the club arrived on the scene and asked me to leave. I showed him my ticket stub. He asked me to put on my jacket and step

downstairs. I only did the latter. People were arriving in droves at that time. I insisted on his giving me a reason for being detained. He disappeared for a few minutes and then returned. He told me that according to their dress code T-shirts were not allowed. I had seen several women arrive wearing T-shirts. I asked him to explain this. He said that they were the models for the show. I couldn't prove him wrong, although I knew these women were not models. After this incident Schlamp's never had another show that I know of.

1985

On World Day for Lab Animals, one of the ARC board members ran from Duluth to the receiving facility for animals on the St. Paul campus of the U of MN. He was joined by another board member in her wheelchair for the last miles. I still don't know how it happened, but they arrived at dusk just as the candlelight vigil was starting. During the day there was a march and rally on campus, and tabling in the student lounge in the Health Science Moos Towers, where the Generelli primate head injury tapes were shown all day.

Because of the atrocities at the Minneapolis dog pound, a concerted effort was begun with several groups working together to get the facility closed down. The city had contracted out for the service, so that usually means the lowest bidder, within certain guidelines, gets the contract. Pound seizure was in effect at that time (Ed. Note – it still is today) so the easiest and most profitable route was for the animals not to be claimed. There were several instances of animals going to research who could have been claimed. Case in point: On a whim, I called Research Animal Resources (RAR) at the U of MN and gave them a story about a friend who was visiting the Twin Cities who's Brittany Spaniel had been lost. The friend had to return home and I was still looking for the male Brittany. I got a call a couple days later – a male Brittany had just been delivered from the Minneapolis pound. The woman asked me if the dog I was looking for had only one descended testicle. Of course I said yes. I drove to RAR and in the middle of a large garage was a lone cage containing the dog. The attendant opened the cage and, as if on cue, the dog ran to me wagging his tail and wiggling. I had to wait for the pound to send a truck, follow the truck back to the pound, sign a bunch of papers, and the dog was mine! I took him directly to the vet as he had a terrible case of kennel cough. I found him a home with a young woman who was planning to take him with her when she worked at a nursing home. As she was looking through the lost and found section of the paper the next Sunday, she came across an ad that fit the Brittany's description. I called, and sure enough, the dog's family had been found. What a reunion – the parents were laughing and the kids were crying. I had heard the story before how they come out on how the dog got away. The story was legitimate and the dog had been wearing tags when he disappeared (which were missing when he arrived at the U). The family had been advertising for almost two months and had pretty much given up hope. Stories like this and others finally persuaded Minneapolis officials to dismiss the paid contractor and the city of Minneapolis to take on the responsibility of animal control.

The Animal Rights American Run began on July 4th. The theme was non-violence to both animals and people. Board member Ron Sadowsky started the run in Boston, accompanied by many for the 10 to 20 miles, and ended the run the next March when he ran into the ocean near Los Angeles, again accompanied by many runners. Ron received tremendous media coverage throughout the run, with speaking engagements, potluck dinners, and many donations. We had

terrible luck getting any local coverage, even when he arrived in Minneapolis at about the halfway mark of the run. One radio talk show host (who was one of the conference speakers) did a daily update. I drove alongside Ron for the first ten days and was again there at the end in Los Angeles. The outpouring of people, both at the beginning and the end, was spectacular. Ron said the response was overwhelming at most of his stops along the way.

The National Trapping Convention was held in Duluth that fall. ARC supported Duluth's Animal Allies group by sending a busload and several carloads of people. Two ARC members attended the convention and had lots to tell us. We could "spy" too.

We were finding that more and more conventions, seminars, and other gatherings of animal users were devoting large blocks of time to discussing the Animal Rights movement. Publications from these organizations also contained many articles on the movement. The U of MN even published a manual on how to deal with us – and not a small one either at 50 some pages. This we felt was a real victory.

This was about the time that Animal Liberation Front (ALF) efforts were going on locally. The media did not cover any of the events, but there were fur store windows broken in several Minneapolis locations, fast food shop key holes were filled with Super Glue, and a dog was liberated from the Veteran's Administration hospital.

The three-day national conference in September was another great success. For the first time at any gathering like this, ALF actions were discussed on a panel, with a message from the Minnesota ALF. Many wonderful people participated including my personal hero, the very brave Meeker County Sheriff who had refused to turn dogs over to the U of MN as he had been directed to do so following his puppy mill raids. He also was concerned about the treatment of downed farm animals and had interceded several times on their behalf. The 1983 and 1985 conferences were held at St. Catherine's College, a good choice because of the facility and their food services' willingness to experiment with new food. Some of the dishes served at the conference went on to be staple offerings to the students.

1986

I was invited to write a piece for *The Animals Agenda* Jan/Feb 1986 Forum section of their first glossy edition. The subject was "What Goals Do You Think can be Achieved in the Next 10 Years?"

My home was no longer an option to house the ARC office. A storefront office opened on June 1, 1986 at 3517 Hennepin Ave. S. We were very fortunate to have someone willing to work a 40+ hour week. The U of MN ARC was organized at this time. Another branch named LISA (Legislation In Support of Animals) was also organized. (Ed. Note: LISA no longer exists as the person who organized it moved and is now the director of the Humane Society of Louisiana.)

Two of us from ARC met with the Minnesota Commissioner of Agriculture regarding the face branding dairy cows. Pending the outcome of the suit to stop the branding in New York State, Minnesota dairy farmers, ARC, the Animal Welfare Institute (AWI), and state officials were

readied to file a suit in Minnesota. Luckily, the judge in New York ruled that face branding was an inhumane practice and the branding was halted.

ARC began efforts directed at the U of MN Animal Care Committee (ACC). I went to Kent Rees' office (he was head of the committee at that time) and asked to see the ACC files. I had arrived unannounced and must have caught him off guard as he agreed to it. He was extremely nervous, but I just kept smiling at him and chatting. His was the most horrible office that I have ever been in – with stuffed animals on every available table space and hanging from the walls. I didn't ask for copies of all the ACC minutes, but just certain ones as I went through them (I should have asked for them all). The ACC was meeting on an average of twice a year and it looked as though the meetings weren't that well attended. In all the minutes that I read there was never a mention of the animals, only of transportation, cage cleaning, paperwork, and so on. I thought this was disgusting and brought it to the attention of Kent Rees and Patrick Manning. ARC decided to become the "squeaky wheel." We were thrown out of meetings and hung up on. But the ACC now meets about every two weeks and there is more discussion about the animals involved.

Betsy Beaver, a 20-foot inflatable beaver, was brought to Minneapolis from England by an activist named Peter, who was promoting pending legislation to ban the leghold trap. At Lake Harriet, one of the many stops in Minnesota, while the kids were dragging their parents over to see Betsy and we were handing out informational material, a park police officer told Peter to take Betsy down. Instead, Peter took Betsy for a stroll and Betsy was arrested. Betsy was then packed into the paddy wagon and the Minneapolis police were summoned. They in turn radioed a supervisor who told them that they were setting themselves up for a constitutional lawsuit. The park police officer was told to leave us alone. A videotape of this adventure was shown on public access cable.

The sale of lion and zebra skins was discontinued at Dayton's department store because of an ARC letter writing campaign. We had felt that this would be a winnable effort and we very badly needed a victory. The department manager said later that he had always been uncomfortable with this type of merchandise and was relieved that he wouldn't have to deal with the issue anymore.

Another victory was the discontinuing of a class at the Wood Lake Nature Center in Richfield that taught children how to make doll house rugs from mouse carcasses. It took lots of phone calls, many letters, individuals going to the center to talk to the program director, and letters from Richfield citizens to the local newspapers, but the class was finally discontinued.

1987

Attendance at meetings was averaging 45 to 55 people so a decision was made to move to a new office. We couldn't find another storefront and ended up in our current location, where we outgrew the first office and moved to another office.

At the World Day for Lab Animals event this year, several ARC members staged a sit-in at Diehl Hall and were arrested. Except for the *Minnesota Daily*, there was no media coverage. As a matter of fact, the Daily has done the best job of reporting our efforts over the years.

The fourth and final three-day conference was held. We broadened our focus to recognize and understand the commonality of purpose and intent that the animal liberation movement shares with the struggle for peace and justice, women's rights, civil rights, conservation, and social responsibility. Additional workshops were held on Thursday and Monday.

1988

Football players at the U of MN were discovered to have been torturing, killing, and mutilating animals in a dorm room on campus. A player living in the dorm exposed what was happening. He was in fear of his own well-being, but came forward nonetheless. We tried to get the media involved, with no success. The Daily covered the story extensively, including in the Letters from Readers section, but little action was taken. Kent Rees, the ex-head of the ACC, and the campus police looked into the matter. We tried contacting the football coach by letter and phone call, asking that we be allowed to come speak to the players. We were thwarted at every turn and never did hear from the coach directly.

About this time there was an outpouring of support from artists of all kinds. Comic strips (mostly Bloom County), visual artists, authors of all types of publications, music, and the visual media began addressing our issues. It really looked as if the issues were going to reach a segment of the public that had never before been exposed to them. This was almost too good to be true.

1989

The Animal Rights movement moved from the ridicule to the communication stage. My personal realization of this came when I and another ARC member appeared on a talk show with two U of MN researchers in late January. I had debated one of these men several times before. In the middle of the hour I suddenly realized that he was on the defensive. Wow! I felt so empowered at that moment. It's hard to explain the feeling, but the rest of the show was a piece of cake. We were asked back for a second hour two weeks later because of feedback from the listening audience. One of the researchers evidently had spent the entire two weeks preparing for our second encounter. He was loaded down with paper and books to support his position, but it didn't help – the second hour went even better than the first.

As a result of the change in status, the face of the Animal Rights movement changed. There was added interest from Middle America, the media started covering events, there was increased contact coming from the media to us, other educational and civic groups sought us out for endorsements of their events, including asking us to speak, and the disenfranchised, who cling to movements during their infancies, began to drop away.

This was also the year of Kona, the dog that was starved, brutally beaten, and left for dead. Working on this very frustrating situation brought many people forward. Some of those people

are still with ARC. This story does have a happy ending. Kona lived out the rest of his days with lots of TLC from a family that tended to his special needs as a result of the trauma he suffered.

1990

The Washington March for the Animals in June was one of the highlights of my involvement with this movement. Minnesota was very well represented and our banners and placards were outstanding.

Ending Statement

I am going to end the history here. Many of you have been around in the past few years and could write your own history.

I must admit that I was hesitant to retire from the ARC presidency, but very credible leaders have emerged and ARC is healthy and moving forward – and frankly, I was exhausted. I have been so gratified by ARC's growth and the wonderful people that this movement has given me a chance to know personally.

I could have talked for most of the day, but have just hit on some of the highlights. This very sketchy background on the history of ARC does not cover the time-consuming, difficult, and vital work that went on behind the scenes. This work was typically done, at least in the first several years, by a core group of five to ten people. Examples of this include fundraising, producing newsletters and other written materials, correspondence, networking with individuals and groups, answering hundreds of phone calls, and leading meetings – and this list is just the tip of the iceberg.

An example of how much things have changed is the topic of vegetarianism. Concern from friends, family, and others that you would probably drop dead in your tracks was the theme as little as 15 to 20 years ago. There were no vegetarian entrees in restaurants. I got to the point that I never wanted to see another dinner salad in my lifetime. In fact, most restaurants treated you like an alien when you asked questions about the food. There certainly were no selections in grocery stores and not really much of a selection at health food stores and coops either. My daughter and I made the soy milk and mock duck for our family. I brought my covered buckets to Kasota and Highway 280 to buy tofu. I got it warm from the manufacturer. I was nice to know the people that made it and to watch it come down the assembly line. They went out of business when tofu became popular and the big companies started underselling them. But I've never tasted tofu as good as that since. The Mud Pie vegetarian restaurant was just a little hole in the wall with a couple of booths, a counter with stools, a very laid-back waitperson, and a cook. But it was still my favorite restaurant.

I have tended to focus on the issues, events, and the parts of history that I was particularly interested in. So much has happened in the past 14 years, all positive for the animals and we who are doing the frustrating work for their liberation. My one wish is that we achieve the third and final stage on our efforts – Acceptance. I am personally convinced that the second stage of

communication will not last as long as the first stage of ridicule. Every one of us needs to reach out to bring in more people. We each need to be educators and to do this, we need to educate ourselves, no matter how painful that process is, and we need to never apologize for what we are doing. No one ever has to apologize for being merciful. And always remember, we are right!